

Trump is winning and heads are spinning as North Korea talks get off to a running start



President Donald Trump might just pull out a win on North Korea. AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais

-President Donald Trump has emerged from a year on the brink of nuclear war with North Korea with a prospective peace deal.

-China and Japan appear to be struggling to keep up with the progress and promises being made in the Koreas.

-But North Korea's progress has been all talk up to now, and nobody can honestly say whether they're sincere.

-Having announced an end to testing nuclear devices and ballistic missiles, North Korea can now pursue a different kind of relationship with the outside world.

-If it happens on Trump's watch, it will likely count as a big win.

President Donald Trump has emerged from a year on the brink of nuclear war with North Korea with a prospective, unprecedented meeting with its leader Kim Jong Un on the books, renewed hopes of peace, and Nobel Peace Prize buzz.

Put bluntly, the reversal in North Korea's attitude towards the US represents one of the most stunning turns in politics since Trump scored a tremendous upset to win the 2016 presidential election.

So far, North Korea has repeatedly promised it will denuclearize, and has invited the US and South Korea to observe part of that promise. North Korea hasn't asked for the US to do anything in exchange besides agree not to invade them.

When a Trump administration official called for US detainees in North Korea to be released as a sign of Pyongyang's sincerity, days later reports emerged that Kim had allowed just that.

All of these developments are so far only talk and plans. But they represent big wins for Trump's stated aims: peace and denuclearization.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in has credited Trump with creating the atmosphere necessary for an inter-Korean summit. North Korea expert John Delury wrote at 38 North that this has “put diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula off to a very good start.”

• **Heads are starting to spin**



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un toasts with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing, as he paid an unofficial visit to China, in this undated photo released by North Korea’s Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) in Pyongyang March 28,2018. KCNA/via Reuters

A snap meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Kim just weeks after Trump accepted an offer to meet with Kim indicates that China may be struggling to insert itself into a dialogue that seems to put US concerns first.

China wants the US military out of South Korea. The presence of nearly 30,000 US troops near its borders troubles China, which feels the US is trying to contain it.

The US’s missile defenses in South Korea also have radars that can see deep into Chinese territory, and which China fears could hobble it in a nuclear war with the US, thereby making it an existential threat.

But neither North Korea nor South Korea has pushed for the US to leave the Korean Peninsula. In fact, if North Korea seriously goes through with verifiable denuclearization, a US or UN military presence could creep even closer to China above the 38th parallel.

Japan is also scrambling to set up a meeting with Kim, though thus far it has been denied. Instead, Japan will meet with South Korea and China to lobby them to insert their interests into the negotiations as the Koreans speed on without them.

A word of warning



President Donald Trump Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

Trump's North Korea policy is going pretty well, so far. But North Korea has made many of the exact promises it has made in previous negotiations, only to back out again and double down on its nuclear ambitions.

All of the progress made so far on peace in the Koreas has been talk, occurring at a rapid pace. There's laughter, hand-holding, and promises by the plenty, but not a single screw loosened on a weapon of mass destruction.

Trump sailed through the niceties, but has not yet hit the concrete work of denuclearizing, which experts nearly unanimously think will be very difficult.

In fact, Jeffrey Lewis, the go-to expert on North Korea for CNN, The New York Times, and often Business Insider, recently wrote an article in Foreign Policy called "Optimism About Korea Will Kill Us All."

In the piece he argues that expectations have been set too high for the Trump-Kim summit, and could eventually lead to disappointment, and then a war in which we all die.

But both Moon and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo continue to affirm Kim's commitment to denuclearization, likely knowing fully the risks that shattered expectations would bring.

Reason for hope, not hype



A view of the newly developed intercontinental ballistic rocket Hwasong-15's test that was successfully launched, in this undated photo released by North Korea's Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) in Pyongyang November 30, 2017. Reuters

North Korea recently announced that it's done with its nuclear weapons program. After successfully testing an intercontinental-range ballistic missile and what experts describe as a thermonuclear bomb, it has called for an end to testing.

Nuclear and ICBM tests prompted many of the recent, heavy sanctions placed on North Korea. The tests served as a major irritant in the US, South Korea, Japan, and even China's relationship with Pyongyang.

Now that North Korea has credibly built nuclear missiles that it and much of the world can confidently say will work enough of the time to matter, it doesn't have to do tests any more.

Having ditched its most annoying habit — nuclear detonations and missile launches — North Korea can now pursue a different relationship with its neighbors and former foes, who will no longer have to respond to shocking media stories about the scary, defiant launches.

Even if North Korea only stops testing and maintains some residual, secretive nuclear capability while talking to and pursuing peace with the outside world, that's a big win for Trump's presidency, as he would have secured a unique and positive result from his unorthodox approach to the conflict.

North Korea's peace push and promises have by no means eliminated the possibility of nuclear war on the peninsula, but then again, nothing can ever guarantee that war in Korea definitely won't happen.

But under Trump's watch, Pyongyang has moved to delay war, and in a world where war is always possible, delays might be as good as it gets.

This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of Business Insider.

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